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MIDDLE EAST

WAR OVER LEBANON?

THE HABIB MISSION

Officials at the White House, State Department and key Middle East diplomats share a deep pessimism over the chances of the Habib mission to prevent an outbreak of hostilities between Israel and Syria. Former Under Secretary of State Phillip Habib was dispatched this week to Syria, Lebanon and Israel in an eleventh hour attempt to forestall an Israeli attack on Syrian missile emplacements. Habib flies first to Damascus, then travels overland to Lebanon (because the Beirut airport remains closed) to meet with Lebanese government officials and Christian leaders. He then returns to Damascus to meet with Syrian President Hafez Assad before journeying on to Israel.

Habib's primary goal, according to State Department officials, is to negotiate Syrian withdrawal from strategic mountain positions seized in recent fighting (achieving this objective may require major Christian concessions, including withdrawal of their militia from Zahle). State Department officials believe this kind of solution would facilitate removal of the Syrian missiles. They note that the pretext for Syrian placement of missiles in Lebanon - protecting their helicopter gunships - assumes continued attacks against the Christian positions.

The only optimism State officials express is over the initial reaction to the mission. Habib, of Lebanese Christian extraction, will be welcomed as an old friend by the Christians in Lebanon. Israeli Prime Minister Begin has already expressed his "delight" over the choice and Habib's meeting with Assad will be the first time a senior US official has met with the Syrian President in nearly two years (State Department officials have told the *Survey* that Saudi Arabia was "helpful" in arranging the visit to Damascus). However, barring some unforeseen success by Habib, senior officials directly concerned with the crisis are now prepared to direct their efforts at "containment" of hostilities after an Israeli strike at the missile batteries.

A SENSE OF "DEJA VU"

The Israeli government contends that by placing SAM missiles inside Lebanon and employing helicopter gunships against the Christian forces, Syria has violated an "understanding" over the limits of their operations in Lebanon. Israel, for its part, had its own understanding with the Christian forces which included protection against Syrian air attacks. Initially, Israeli officials contended that this was restricted to neutralizing MIG attacks but reluctantly, in the face of great pressure from the Christians (who were defenseless against gunship attacks), they moved to neutralize the helicopter attacks.

The Syrian response, to move SAM 2, SAM 6 and SAM 9 missile batteries along their border and into Lebanon presented Israel with a challenge that one official described as giving him "a real sense of deja vu." The 1970 War of Attrition between Israel and Egypt ended with restrictions on Egyptian deployment of SAM missiles. These restrictions were, however, not observed and concentrations of SAMs provided essential cover for

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and an outcry from the Congress, the press and the Israeli government. The resulting delay in formal Congressional notification, according to State Department sources, raised doubts in Saudi Arabia over the Administration's ability to fulfill its commitment. "We are taking a temporary breather," one State Department official told the *Survey*.

The only visible Administration activity has been an unsigned nine-page Pentagon memorandum circulated on Capitol Hill. Poorly conceived and badly written, it has drawn sharp criticism from White House staffers, State Department officials and Congressional aides. "It reads like we are lobbying for Saudi Arabia and not for the US national interest," a White House adviser told the *Survey*. "It is filled with distortions and inaccuracies," a Congressional aide declared. A State Department lobbyist was so angered at the memo's assertion that the AWACS "could conceivably be employed opposite Israel" that he has refused requests from Congressional offices for additional copies. "The memorandum reflects the Defense Department's attitude that the Saudis need everything they demand," one State insider told the *Survey*.

The Defense Department's handling of the AWACS issue and last month's White House announcement of the decision has drawn sharp criticism not only from the State Department, but from other parts of the Administration. According to reliable sources, senior officials who are leading Reagan's campaign for tax and budget cuts were infuriated at the spate of negative publicity last month. These sources claim that even Reagan's chief Congressional lobbyist, Max Friedersdorf, was not consulted in advance.

Several Administration officials lay part of the blame on National Security Adviser Richard Allen for his unwillingness (or inability) to reconcile the conflicting positions of the State and Defense Departments and to foresee the political ramifications of the AWACS announcement. "The NSC should fulfill these functions," one Defense Department source said. "We never saw their [NSC] imprint on paper or in meetings," one State insider said.

A NEW COMMITTEE

A number of Administration officials who spoke with the *Survey* expressed the hope that the AWACS issue will prompt Reagan and Counselor Ed Meese to strengthen the role of the NSC. "This will require additional staff and a higher visibility," a Defense Department official told the *Survey*. The *Survey* has learned that the Defense Department's "enthusiasm" has been moderated by the establishment of an ad-hoc interagency task force to deal solely with the AWACS issue. Called the "Coordinating Group for Certain Middle East Initiatives," the task force is headed by Under Secretary of Defense Fred Iklé and includes officials from the Pentagon, State Department, White House, National Security Council and Office of Management and Budget. According to reliable sources, the group will meet every Monday and coordinate Administration efforts with Congress, Israel and Saudi Arabia. The Administration still wants to negotiate an agreement that will give the US a measure of control over the AWACS system. One senior State Department official told the *Survey* that while a "formal" agreement can be reached on joint control, "we won't get everything we would want." Other officials, however, were less optimistic. One Pentagon insider doubted that the Saudis would accept any agreement prior to official notification of the sale to Congress. Even then, he said, the Saudi officials would only convey private verbal commitments to members of Congress. One State Department source gave little hope for significant Saudi concessions in view of the publicity surrounding the AWACS. He argued that negotiations over joint control should have been concluded prior to the announcement of the sale. "Now that the issue is public, the Saudis can view any formal agreement as a sign of weakness," he declared.

If arduous negotiations with Saudi Arabia are anticipated, efforts to mute Israeli opposition are expected to prove equally difficult. Israeli officials not only consider the AWACS itself a security threat, but believe the sale will fuel a regional arms race. One senior official told the *Survey* that the AWACS sale has already prompted Egypt to request additional military assistance from the US including the E2C "Hawkeye" radar reconnaissance planes. In a short time, this official maintained, the Syrians, Iraqis and Libyans will seek more armaments from the Soviet Union which will in turn prompt new arms requests from Egypt and Israel. [The US last week agreed to speed deliveries

the Egyptian crossing of the Suez Canal in October 1973. Israel fears that a similar "creeping" deployment of SAMs into the Beika Valley would threaten all air operations over Lebanon. Military analysts point out that a variety of SAMs protect one another and make an Israeli air strike a costly venture (despite advances in electronic counter measures over the past eight years).

The outcome in Lebanon is expected to have a major impact on what has become an extremely close election in Israel (the latest polls show a virtual dead heat between Begin's Likud Party and the Labor Alignment led by Shimon Peres). The tensions have boosted Begin's political fortunes, but a costly attack on the Syrian position is certain to bring down angry charges that Begin should have acted sooner. However, US officials believe that Begin has gained "a lot of chips" with his acquiescence in delay. "Israel will eventually get a 'green light' for military action" the *Survey* was told by one State Department insider. Another went even further arguing that the Habib mission will "lay the diplomatic groundwork" for a military strike against Syrian missiles.

SOVIET INTENTIONS

There is no lack of theories about the motivations behind Soviet support for Syrian actions. Some State Department officials believe that the Soviets expect to benefit from a "limited" Syrian-Israeli military confrontation. These officials contend that the Soviet Union expects "moderate" Arab states, now hostile to Syria, to be forced to line up against the Israeli foe and the US. They also believe that the Soviets are testing American resolve. Other State Department officials not noted for their hostility to the Soviet Union have told the *Survey* that the Lebanon crisis could provide a convenient cover for action against Poland. West German officials reportedly concur in this assessment.

State Department officials maintain that despite Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin's repeated meetings with senior US officials, the Soviets "have not been helpful." They have merely repeated their criticism of Israeli overflights of Lebanon and upheld Syria's "right to self defense."

Some observers maintain that the Reagan Administration has misplayed the crisis from the beginning - underestimating the problem at first, then frightened of war, overreacting. These observers believe that Israel should have been allowed to "take out" the SAMs when they were first introduced - and before Lebanon became "an international crisis."

THE OUTLOOK

A clear consensus exists that an Israeli airstrike is only one to two weeks away unless major diplomatic progress is made. US and Israeli officials believe that only the Soviet Union can force a removal of the SAMs. They argue that the Soviets need to be aware that a major military defeat inflicted on Syria could bring about an end to the Assad regime - and the Soviet role there (Soviet advisers have recently become the object of attacks in Syria where the embattled minority Alawite regime has ruled with Soviet support since 1966).

If a diplomatic solution can be found, veteran observers caution not to expect a "formal or public agreement." Instead there will be a gradual winding down of the crisis and then "the missiles will be quietly withdrawn."

EXECUTIVE BRANCH

AWACS "ON HOLD"

Facing widespread opposition to its arms sales policy toward Saudi Arabia and confronted with a crisis in Lebanon, the Administration is deferring action on the AWACS issue. The decision to provide the AWACS was accompanied by interagency feuds

of tanks, aircraft, [illegible]
the Administration informed Egyptian Defense Minister Lieut. Gen. Mohammad Abdel Halim Abu Ghazala in Washington that it would give "favorable consideration" to the Hawkeye request, but that budgetary constraints [illegible] approval.]

The Coordinating Group, according to reliable insiders, has been instructed to give priority to Israeli security concerns. However, discussions during the Group's most recent meeting last Monday concentrated on how to avoid "embarrassing" the Saudis. In future meetings, the task force is expected to consider additional military aid to Israel as well as possible electronic control measures (ECM) to "jam" or "neutralize" the AWACS. The *Survey* has learned that the OMB has already raised objections to the State Department recommendation that $600 million in additional military assistance to Israel (for the purchase of F-15 aircraft) be provided as a grant rather than a loan. While Israeli military experts assume that an ECM against the AWACS has been developed by the US, they do not expect it to be supplied to a foreign country.

One State Department source told the *Survey* that for the near future, the Coordinating Group will avoid "specific" recommendations or decisions. Since the AWACS is currently a major news item, officials fear that any early decisions will be leaked to the press. According to another State insider, the Coordinating Group's decisions may not necessarily be binding. This source maintained that other Administration officials will have an opportunity to make recommendations outside the framework of the task force. In addition, Senate Majority Leader Howard Baker (R-Tenn.), who personally convinced Reagan to delay the arms sales proposal, is also expected to have major input on the timing and the composition of the package. According to Congressional sources, Baker has yet to begin talks with the Administration and has urged his colleagues to be "patient."

POSTSCRIPT ON THE CARTER ADMINISTRATION

According to senior officials in the Carter Administration, Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger's "enthusiasm" for arms sales to Saudi Arabia and his influence at the White House is reminiscent of former Secretary Harold Brown's views and his relationship with Carter. These officials told the *Survey* that shortly after the Presidential election, Brown convinced the President to approve the sale to Saudi Arabia of auxiliary fuel tanks and Sidewinder missiles for the F-15 aircraft as well as AWACS planes. [One former White House aide recalled the depressed gathering of the Cabinet and senior staff in the Roosevelt Room on Election Day: "We were all consoling each other when Brown walked in and announced that the Administration must now go ahead with the F-15s for the Saudis. We were all stunned."] Vice President Mondale (who, according to reliable sources, was unaware of the AWACS decision) urged Carter to inform Jerusalem of the decision to provide the fuel tanks and missiles and give Israel compensation by rescheduling a portion of its debt. Carter rejected both suggestions.

The Reagan transition, however, asked that the Carter Administration not announce the F-15 proposal because it wished to handle the issue in its own way. One motivation for the Reagan request, according to a former Carter aide, was the new Administration's desire to get credit from the Saudis. "They were going to get the down side with the Israelis whether we or Reagan announced the sale," he said. "But they wanted the up side with the Saudis." This aide admitted that the Carter Administration is "partly to blame" for a "bad decision," but argued that the Reagan team has managed to anger both the Israelis and the Saudis. "Saudi Arabia wanted the AWACS and the F-15 equipment as a test of the US-Saudi relationship," he said. "By delaying the package until after the Israeli elections and adding sweetners for Israel, the sale no longer is a bilateral issue."